

## «‘THE INNER GEOGRAPHY OF HOME’: THE ECOFEMINIST ETHICS OF DAPHNE MARLATT’S TAKEN»<sup>1</sup>

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«To touch beyond the window the very texture of the place,  
soak in its smells, its sounds. This happened without question.  
What was questionable was the inner geography of home.»  
Daphne Marlatt, *Taken*

Critics and cultural commentators would probably agree that one of the most promising areas of feminist research and study in the last twenty five years has been opened by the confluence between gender studies and geography, geology, cartography and other space-related fields. It has become widely accepted that the spatial configurations of physical territories are ideologically charged, and therefore carry cultural meanings that affect in different ways the lives of men and women<sup>2</sup>. Since places and spaces *are* gendered, spatial arrangements determine and reinforce gendered relations of power, as well as construct gendered subjects by means of a varied set of practices that may go from repression to violence, from complicity to identification<sup>3</sup>. In literature, settings, the representation of physical movement, the description of place certainly determine important parcels of knowledge and subjectivity, and can, therefore, not only reproduce (or dismantle) their implicit gendered structures,

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2. HIGONNET, Margaret R.: «New Cartographies», in Margaret R. Higonnet and Joan Templeton (eds): *Reconfigured Spheres: Feminist Explorations of Literary Space*, Amherst, U. Of Massachussets, 1994, pp. 1-19.

3. SPAIN, Daphne: *Gendered Spaces*, Chapel Hill, U. of North Carolina P, 1992.

but also produce new ones<sup>4</sup>. Such a realization, in turn, has pushed feminist criticism further into interdisciplinary arenas, from which «to undertake new cartographies, to trace the ways writers inscribe gender onto the symbolic representation of space within texts, whether through images of physical confinement, of exile and exclusions, of property and territoriality, or of the body as the interface between individual and communal identities»<sup>5</sup>.

Contemporary Canadian writing by women, both fictional and non-fictional, seems to illustrate well that paradigm shift within feminist production, showing an unflinching interest in the spatial dimension of gender constructions, and providing thoughtful analyses of the ways in which «[s]ocial relations and spatial processes are mutually reinforcing»<sup>6</sup>. Being the product of (post)colonial circumstances, it has always been aware of how gendered structures affect and are affected by the traditional alliance between patriarchal and imperialist discourses, and of how the issues pertaining to the body, sex and sexuality are also always related to the social perception of space and place. As Linda McDowell shows, «assumptions about the correct place for embodied women are drawn on to justify and to challenge systems of patriarchal domination in which women are excluded from the particular spatial arenas and restricted to others. In this sense, to ‘know their place’ has a literal as well as a metaphorical meaning for women, and sexed embodiment is deeply intertwined with geographical location»<sup>7</sup>.

Within that general framework, and of all the recent novels that offer suggestive explorations of the ways in which gender intersects with space, Daphne Marlatt’s novel *Taken* (1996) openly denounces the violence of spatial constructions of subjectivity and proposes, at the same time, alternative connections that may counteract the uneven effects of traditional alliances between identity and place. On the one hand, the novel connects the events of the 1991 Gulf War with the Japanese invasion of Malaya during World War II, identifying the similarities between the official discourses in both cases and unveiling in the process the power of language to produce and justify violence, territorial invasions, forced migrations and the physical entrapment of (female) bodies. On the other, its theoretical exploration of sexual difference is often carried out by means of an invocation of the maternal, be this real and/or symbolic, related to our real mothers and/or applied to a relational form of subjectivity based on alterity. As a result of the juxtaposition of those two strategies, we are offered what Marie Carrière calls «a feminist ethics, which may be defined as the attempt to think female and maternal alterity, and relations between and among sexes, outside the totality and assimilation

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4. HUMM, Maggie: «Into the Millenium: Feminist Literary Criticism,» *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 48 (2004), p. 46.

5. HIGONNET, Margaret R.: Op. Cit., p. 2.

6. MCDOWELL, Linda: *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*, Minneapolis, U. of Minnesota P, 1999, p. 56.

7. *Ibíd.*

of the self-same»<sup>8</sup>. In this essay I wish to examine the imprints of that feminist ethics in Marlatt's *Taken*, a text that rethinks the (female) subject's relation to territory, place and space, and puts forward a form of maternalism defined at the junction between feminism and ecology. Tracing lines of comparison and action between the two, ecofeminism could be defined as «feminism taken to its logical conclusion, because it theorizes the interrelations among self, societies, and nature»<sup>9</sup>. My analysis will try to elucidate some of the implications contained in Marlatt's radical proposal. Against a cartography of war, occupation, and violence, Marlatt's text offers an escape by the landscape, a geography of the female body, maternalism, and the body's fusion with the environment.

*Taken's* interest in renegotiating the relationship between time and space is already announced by the double narrative structure, a doubleness framed by geography (Canada/Malaya-Australia) and time (1<sup>st</sup> Gulf War/WW II), where the first framework, the geographic, is closer to the personal and the second, the temporal, is closer to the historical and the public. This basic space/time perspective determines two different approaches to language, the body, the land, and the notions of belonging and home. The North American narrative is set on an unnamed British Columbia island in the early 1990s, where Suzanne, the first-person narrator, lives trying to come to terms with the memories of her mother as well as with her separation from her lover, Lori, who at the beginning of the story leaves for the United States in order to take care of her own dying mother. Suzanne's strong identification with the land she inhabits, a continuous current throughout the novel, is initially extended to the (lesbian) female body, which is often qualified in terms of the island's natural landscape. The female body *is* nature, and nature *is* home. And that double association acts at the beginning as a counterpoint to a background of death and desolation in Iraq, as the daily news break into the quiet morning space of the house. In this way, juxtaposed to the dreadful vocabulary of war, «Tomahawk cruise missiles and Stealth fighters, plague-laden warheads, a holy war»<sup>10</sup>, the reader finds beautiful sensual descriptions of nature on the island, whose soothing effects are, in turn, reinforced by love-making scenes figured in nature's terms: «Still in the nest we have made of our bodies in bed, burrowed into each other, i inhale the odour of your skin, deeply familiar. I want to sink beyond place, lost, in the 'o' my lips make around the smooth berry of your nipple» (8). As the narrative moves on, however, Suzanne and Lori break up, and the painful experience starts paralleling, instead of counterpointing, the ongoing violence of the Gulf War. In those circumstances, it is Suzanne's close attachment to the physical

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8. CARRIÈRE, Marie: *Writing in the Feminine in French and English Canada: A Question of Ethics*, Toronto, U. of Toronto P, 2002, p. 4.

9. BIRKELAND, Janis: «Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice», in Greta Gaard (ed.): *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, Philadelphia, Temple UP, 1993, pp. 17-18.

10. MARLATT, Daphne: *Taken*, Concord (On.), Anansi, 1996, p. 19. Hereafter, page references to this book will be made parenthetically within the text.

space around her, the space of the island, that remains, providing the only sense of grounding for the otherwise broken experience of life.

The Asian narrative, told by Suzanne in the third person, is set in Penang, Singapore and Melbourne (and only indirectly in England, where Suzanne's grandfather lives) in the 1930s and 1940s, and offers Suzanne's own uncertain reconstruction of her mother's life during those times: «The words i've heard, the phrases i seem to remember, part of a background that shaped me, take on a glow of meaning i never sensed» (29-30). The direction of the love relationship between Suzanne's mother and father, Esme and Charles, is here inverse; that is, their separation, forced by the outbreak of World War II in Asia, is followed by their reunion at the end. Invariably described in social rather than physical or emotional terms, the nature of this heterosexual love story is also markedly different from the lesbian relationship. And so is the characters' approach to the land they live in tied to the social rituals of colonial life in the Straits Settlements and completely devoid of physical attachment. In fact, it is the complex social structure of colonial life that determines their precarious sense of belonging, and that is especially seen in the description of women's lives there, «[i]dentifying not so much with the place or its people as with a circle of friends transplanted, like them, floating tendrils through each others' lives in gossip, Residency balls, The Straits Times, curry tiffin at the Club» (25). The notion of home is inextricably complicated by the colonial contradictions and appears thus linked to fiction, desire, nostalgia for that which never was, a non-place:

«Beach parties off Batu Ferringhi, jaunts up Penang Hill to the Crag Hotel with its stupendous sunsets, bats soaring over their heads, drives out to the freshwater pools at Titi Krawang in Freddy the Fiat, excursions to Muka Head. Names with the resonance of nostalgia throbbing in them, tiny arteries to a past that was once living. And what is nostalgia but the longing for a place the body opens to, the very taste of it on one's skin. Ah, but the Straits Settlements, about as far as one could get from England—or from Canada—as exotic a home as one could adopt, if never, never belong in, was still a colony on the fringe of the mother country's skirts.

England was no mother to Esme, born in India, though she, like her parents, continually referred to it as «home.» Home that was not, misplaced home that could never be. Where did one belong?

Ghosts are those who occupy a place, but not in the flesh, those who are left with only the memory-trace of it on their tongues». (7)

The wide spatial and temporal gap between the two narrative frameworks serves the narrator as ground to examine and explore a range of approaches to gender and space. The double structure provides, in the first place, the arena for the subversion of our expectations about time and space in the novel. Thus, in contrast to the traditional allocation of transcendence in the temporal, Marlatt's text shifts the emphasis to the spatial and the metonymic configurations of meaning. And, in so doing, the text engages in a process of reinvention of the traditional gendering of time as male and space as female. As Stephen Frosh writes in his analysis of Julia Kristeva's work on the subject:

«Taken at face value, this is a conventional and familiar gendering of things: the feminine, because of the womb and the maternal function, is associated with space, both in the sense of a place from which something is produced, and one in which something is received, enclosed and held. The masculine dimension, however, is active: the male does things, creates history, writes books and speaks words that have an effect [...] Now Kristeva complicates any easy identity of masculinity with time and femininity with space—having versus holding—by arguing that it is not that women *are* space rather than time, but that their time is like space; it has space-like qualities».<sup>11</sup>

*Taken* analyses, articulates and vindicates the possibilities of that space-like time for the female subject; and it does so through its double-plot structure. In the Asian narrative, Esme's life provides a clear instance of the traditional association of the female to the passive and the spatial. Pregnant of her first child, she is forced to stay with her parents in Melbourne against her will, trying to occupy herself, «write letters, pray, eat, sleep, grow a baby as if nothing could possibly happen» (18), while Charles is away at war, doing his manly duty, *creating history*. There is an implicit connection between the strict division of gender roles and the world of the Empire, life in the colonies a repository of traditional values and a strict reproduction of the patriarchal system. That configuration, however, is gradually eroded in the narrative present, where the lesbian relationship breaks sex-gender expectations (including the tacit alliance between gender difference and heterosexuality), moving the terms of the association and smoothly entering a different, space-like time.

An important part of that negotiation of space and time is in the particular approach to language, which is often non-narrative, syntax and grammar logics fail, the frequent ellipses, the broken, unfinished sentences drawing our attention to the spatial rather than the temporal dimensions of language.<sup>12</sup> There are, in fact, two different types of language in the text, each associated to an equally different conception of space: there is a language close to the personal and the intimate, to the body, to the maternal, and to the earth as space to be *felt/filled*; there is also a language of war, violence and destruction, a language of territory as space to be *taken*<sup>13</sup>. The two languages and the two notions of space are constantly juxtaposed and confronted, often with uneven results. In that way, the cold and distant description of war cuts through the extremely personal and intimate stories of the women involved on both sides of the Pacific across half a century. In the case of Esme, the outbreak of World War II in Asia catches her in Australia, where she has gone to visit her parents, and immobilizes her there, away from Charles, who is forced to join the battle front in Malaya. The

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11. FROSH, Stephen: «Time, Space and Otherness», in Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift: *Mapping the Subject: Geographies of Cultural Transformation*, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 298.

12. In her study of lesbian writing, Julie Abraham (*Are girls necessary?*, New York, Routledge, 1996, p. 15) identifies this kind of non-narrative approach in a good number of the texts analysed, a connection between sexuality and writing that could be fruitfully pursued elsewhere in the case of Marlatt's text.

13. See MARLATT, Daphne: *Net Work: Selected Writing*, Vancouver, Talonbooks, 1980, p. 97.

actual power of the war to destroy individual lives is ironically opposed to its (under)representation as a faint, indirect, detached narrative, mentioned just in the spatial terms of advances, retreats, or the occupation of territory, and reduced to the language of newspaper headlines: «JAPAN ADVANCES AGAIN IN MALAYA. EVACUATION OF IPOH»; «RETREAT FROM KUALA LAMPUR» (29). The journalistic register, telegraphic, lacking in verbs, seemingly objective, contrasts heavily with, and affects, the novel's intimate tone and its actual focus on the inner life of Suzanne's mother, «trapped in transit» in Melbourne (4), *taken*, a young pregnant wife separated from her husband by the designs of history. Similarly, in the narrative present, the distressing news of death and destruction in the 1991 Gulf War breaks into and gradually modifies Suzanne's descriptions of love scenes as/and the island landscape: «Then how could we trace our fingers over skin with its delicate opening of pores as our bodies respond, frond by frond, uncurling in the wet? How could i plant my hand around your breast [...] when this continues over there, this trapped dying among those driven to war» (38). It could be argued, in that context, that the novel stages a metaphoric confrontation between «masculine» and «feminine» discourses. And, in fact, the terms--always used in a figurative sense and not necessarily attached therefore to biology, anatomy, or actual bodies--do fittingly apply, since as Birkeland asserts:

«In Western Patriarchal culture, «masculine» constructs and values have been internalized in our minds, embodied in our institutions, and played out in power-based social relations both in our daily lives and upon the world stage. It is this «masculine» undercurrent, not human-centeredness, which is behind the irrational ideas and behavior displayed on the evening news<sup>14</sup>».

As we can see, the disruptive effects of war are sadly unquestionable in the two times and spaces of the novel. Yet the juxtaposition of the antagonistic discourses, as well as of the very use of a similar strategy in both cases, becomes subversive in that it dismantles the impersonal rhetorics of war, of any war, across geography and time, binding it to an erased intimacy and thus, somehow, transmuting its deadly consequences. As Marlatt herself asserts, historical events in the novel are relevant only in as much as they are seen «through the filter of women's daily lives, foregrounding the textures of those lives. Women's experiences of war--rape, famine, destruction of their families and homes--are often callously viewed as just 'collateral damage' in the grand heroic narrative of war»<sup>15</sup>.

In order to revert the erasure of the female experience from the historical account, the text turns to the analysis of the spatial dimension of the female subject. Most specifically, it dismantles naturalized approaches to gender by appropriating, examining and re-valuing two stereotypical notions of the

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14. BIRKELAND, Janis: Op. cit., p. 17.

15. KOSSEW, Sue: «History and Place: An Interview with Daphne Marlatt», *Canadian Literature*, 178 (2003), p. 54.

female body as connected to space: the female body as territory, and the female body as nature. The exploration of these two interrelated tropes seems extremely relevant, for, although they have been widely used by feminist critics, it has also become evident that they are double-edged, their strategic use for feminist purposes sometimes perpetuating present, sexist discourses of power, leaving the sex-gender system untouched. In that context, both tropes of the female body depend on a larger metonymy that has defined/reduced women in terms of/to their reproductive function, and are thus linked to an essentialist conception of the maternal space, to the exclusive articulation of the female body/subject as (m)other. And, in addressing these key issues at the heart of contemporary feminist debate, *Taken* becomes self-consciously theoretical, probing further the construct/essence quandary and spelling out the dangers posed, as well as the possibilities offered by both positions.

Once more, the duplicity of the narrative structure serves as a useful tool for the intended analysis. The validity of the first trope, that of the female body as territory or nation, is explored in the Asian narrative with uneven results. I have suggested that colonial life is portrayed as a favourite site for the reproduction of traditional gender roles. The association of the female body with territory is also connected to the Empire, this part of the text stressing «the mapping and physical measuring of empire in sexual terms<sup>16</sup>: both women and territories are *taken*, occupied, colonized. From that viewpoint, the fact that so many women appear to be pregnant, in the letter exchange that takes place between Esme and Charles during the war, is very ambiguous. On the one hand, the women's pregnancies could be interpreted, most obviously, as a sign of excess of life, overturning, at least partially, the deadly effects of war on the Pacific. In the more general context of the tacit complicities among imperialist, patriarchal and Cartesian approaches to subjectivity, the proliferation of pregnant bodies, with its emphasis on the spatial dimensions of the self, would certainly undermine the nature and the established boundaries of the unified, autonomous subject. «It is perhaps surprising,» McDowell comments, «that the subjectivity of pregnant women has been so little studied by the philosophers of bodily existence, as there is no clearer example of the limitations of the Cartesian assumptions of a singular unified subject»<sup>17</sup>.

On the other hand, however, women's pregnancies constitute unsurmountable obstacles to physical movement, their bodies literally trapped, like territories and countries, by the configurations of war – as is the case of Esme herself. That provides, in turn, a clear instance of how gender structures affect the policing of borders and the mobility within and between actual spaces. It is also, most significantly, a case of interaction between the sex-gender system and what Homi Bhabha has called the performative function of nation-narration. As Sumathi Ramaswamy explains in a different context, one of the most effective

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16. HIGONNET, Margaret: Op. cit., p. 12.

17. MACDOWELL, Linda: Op. cit., p. 58.

strategies of nationalism throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was to make demands on the bodies of citizens; that is, the material body became target of official appeals to nationalism, and women's bodies, because of their reproductive capacity, were specially vulnerable to the patriotic plea:

«Invariably, these demands were made differently according to gender, with women being called upon, like the female icon of their nation of which they are living surrogates, to serve with their wombs. As embodiments of domestic respectability, custodians of tradition, and bearers and nurturers of future citizens, women keep 'nostalgia alive in the active world of men'»<sup>18</sup>.

In all cases, the success of the performative function depends on a metonymic alliance between the female body and the nation. But the strategy can easily turn against itself, giving way to violence, both physical and ideological, against women. The most telling example of that undesirable reversal is found in the captive narrative that begins to infiltrate Marlatt's text midway in the novel, emerging unexpectedly and adding a completely new dimension to the Asian narrative. These fragments, marked in italics and narrated in the form of a second-person address, take the reader to the distraught experience of a group of young women caught by the Japanese and taken to a POW camp. Once more, the physicality of the language used, the extremely sensual descriptions and the stress on the purely corporeal, coexist uncomfortably with, willing to contravene, the actual violence perpetrated against these women (as well as with the intermittent bits of factual information about Japan's advances in the Pacific). The effect, as Marlatt herself states, is that of a «Greek chorus of women's voices»<sup>19</sup> against the sound of gun fire:

*«It was the hand of bananas – you don't talk about these things – it was the hand of bananas that brought it home. you can't speak about it — only just ripe, and so many of them, enough to give you several bites each, the whole thing hanging so ripe, so unbearably heavy. your feet wrapped up in rags, the sight of you! pilfered sarongs, mismatched bits of clothing, haggard, no combs, carrying broken crockery like prized possessions from the house they'd let you loot. mouth still sore from hours in the sea, you can barely swallow, but the bananas – you can't speak of this so that anyone can understand – a perfect yellow, smelling dearily familiar, smelling of food in that jungle clearing they'd marched you through. smelling of some other life, not this one newly acquired, not fear, not pain, not the bayonets. all they'd given you was a little broken rice, and all you can think is waste, the lost children, dead babies who will never taste banana, and that woman shuffling beside you like a sleepwalker – you can't speak of it to her, you can't break through her pain.» (63)*<sup>20</sup>

18. RAMASWAMY, Sumathi: «Body Language: The Somatics of Nationalism in Tamil India», in Insa Härtel and Sigrid Schade (eds.): *The Body and Representation*, Opladen, Leske + Budrich, 2002, p. 191.

19. KOSSEW, Sue: Op. cit., p. 50.

20. The sudden appearance of this third narrative framework, made up of «fractured but hypnotic passages» (BALL, Alan Egerton: Review of *Taken*. *FFWD Weekly* (January, 9<sup>th</sup>). n/p., 1997), and the effect it produces on the reader's understanding of the other two would need further analysis



As I have just suggested, the introduction of these impressive POW voices, interspersed in the novel's Part II with the account of Charles's escape by train, then foot, and finally, ship, draws the reader's attention to the actual violence potentially contained in the mentioned metonymic alliance between the female body and the nation. At the same time, it takes to the limit the ongoing critique of the sex-gender system, and specifically, of the association of men to mobility and women to stasis: while the male subject, despite much hardship, manages to escape Japanese bombs, the POW women remain immobilized, taken, as the national territory they supposedly represent, occupied, and colonized once more.

The other stereotypical association that the novel explores, this time, with more positive connotations, is that of the female body as Nature, an analogy depending once more on the larger underlying conception of both women and nature in maternal terms: Woman and/as Nature and/as Mother. As is well known, that association has pervaded the history of thought in a good number of cultures, often with negative results: «Women are seen as closer to nature, as irrational, as polluters, as sacred but as inferior because they menstruate and because of their ability to bear children»<sup>21</sup>. The representation of woman as nature has in fact supported, and been supported by, patriarchal ideology, providing it with a useful tool to confine women to biology, to their bodies, and thus justify gender inequalities on the basis of natural laws<sup>22</sup>. Feminist production, however, has returned to this strategy, reappropriating the connection between women and nature and imbuing it with new, positive meanings. In the first place, the naturalization of the female body can have the reversed effect of interrogating the Cartesian approach to the body as inert matter, thus breaking the binary logics (mind/body) that supports it. Besides, a revisionist approach to the female body as nature also involves a recuperation and re-evaluation of the erased maternal trace, and a new articulation of the relationship between the maternal and subjectivity (both female and male). That approach, that some critics have called 'maternalism,' would not necessarily refer to the biological condition of motherhood, although it often includes it:

«Maternalism connotes, of course, that which is related to the mother. But more than this, maternalism implies being *of* or *like* the mother: the first same *and* other woman, the mother not all of us are or can be, but have or have had, symbolically or in the flesh. Maternalism also refers to the psychoanalytical rendition of the mother-child bond as well as ontology: a relation of sameness and differentiation (here of female sameness and female differentiation). Finally, maternalism is a 'signifying

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elsewhere (see also JACKSON, Lorna: Review of *Taken*. *The Malahat Review*, 121 (1997), p. 120 and DAVEY, Frank: «Women's Lives, Men's Wars» Review of *Taken*, in *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 61 (1997), pp. 17-20).

21. MCDOWELL, Linda: Op. cit., p. 44.

22. See SYDIE, R. A.: *Natural Women, Cultured Men: A Feminist Perspective on Sociological Theory*, Toronto, Methuen, 1987.

space, both corporeal and mental' (Tostevin, *Gyno-Text*). And, as this signifying space, the maternal can function as a socializing space, thus as one possible model of a relational ethics». <sup>23</sup>

Marlatt's linguistic approach to the maternal, a constant in her poetic, narrative, and critical work, is often articulated in terms of a relational ethics. We have already seen how, in *Taken*, the search for the mother (real and imagined) constitutes the connecting thread between the two narrative frameworks. In contrast to Marlatt's previous novel *Ana Historic* (1988), where the search for the maternal parallels the narrator's attempt at historical reconstruction, often through etymological research<sup>24</sup>, the emphasis in *Taken* is, as we have seen, on the personal, the etymological gives way to the geological, and an unfailing connection with nature runs deep through the Canadian narrative and in Suzanne's reconstruction of her mother's life.

By looking at the natural environment as origin and source of life, and thus as *mother* of all things, the novel joins therefore a rich feminist tradition that has exploited the metaphorical potential of such a connection, often with ecological undertones. As Gillian Rose asserts:

«One continuing form of resistance against fictional identities of phallogentrism has been the effort by feminists, as daughters, to re-imagine the mother as the subject of desire, and to explore motherhood as a symbol of a non-phallogentric mode of social relation. Given the powerful interpellation of Nature as Mother in Western culture, this effort has some implications for seeing the land». <sup>25</sup>

The idea is to be already found in seminal feminist works such as Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*: «As we feel the empowerment of our own Naming,» Daly writes, «we hear more deeply our call of the wild. Raising pairs of arms into the air we expand them into shells, sails. Splashing our legs in the water we move our oars» <sup>26</sup>. More recently, the notion of 'ecofeminism' has come to the fore as «a philosophy whose primary tenet is that the same patriarchal world view motivating the oppression of women and minorities motivates human oppression of nonhuman nature as well»<sup>27</sup>. Ecofeminism works against the colonization and occupation of both women and land/nature, builds on the belief that the juxtaposition of the objectives of feminism and ecology will be effective, and considers thus both projects of liberation as intimately connected. Accordingly, it is not a simple theory or a new form of criticism. Rather, it is

23. CARRIÈRE, Marie: Op. cit., p. 32.

24. See JONES, Marina: *That Art of Difference: Documentary-Collage and English-Canadian Writing*, Toronto, U. of Toronto P, 1993, p. 160.

25. ROSE, William: *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of geographical Knowledge*, Minneapolis, U. Of Minnesota P, 1993, p. 110.

26. DALY, Mary: *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, Boston, Beacon, 191 (1978), p. 423.

27. SCHEWENINGER, Lee: «A Skin of Lakeweed: An Ecofeminist Approach to Erdrich and Silko», in Barbara Frey Waxman (ed.): *Multicultural Literature Through Feminist Poststructuralist Lenses*, U. of Tennessee P, 1993, p. 38.

«a value system, a social movement, and a practice, but it also offers a *political analysis* that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction»<sup>28</sup>. Ecofeminism rethinks and revalues the traditional association between women and nature, often used by patriarchal ideology with negative intentions, since «the very essence of ecofeminism is its challenge to the presumed necessity of power relationships. It is about changing from a morality based on 'power over' to one based on reciprocity and responsibility ('power to'). Ecofeminists believe that we cannot end the exploitation of nature without ending human oppression, and vice versa»<sup>29</sup>.

As has been already suggested, it is Suzanne's profound respect for the land she inhabits that will provide the way out from the paralysis produced by her suffering at the personal level (her breaking up with Lori) and at the social, political and moral level (the infamous news of the First Gulf War, the weight of complicity). The two unhappy events, the personal and the political, are joined in the striking image of an oil-covered bird struggling for survival in the Gulf:

«Nights are the worst–i never dreamt that nights could be so bright. The image of a greased cormorant struggling to lift itself from oil-thick waters in the Gulf of Bahrain repeats and repeats. Irreversibly awake i drag a chair to the window overlooking the lake and sit in a halo of light radiating off the moon's track. You've left without saying goodbye, without even looking back, and i am left in the unthinkable space. How could the dialogue of our eyes, that deep and ecstatic look we held each other by, reading the dark places as well as the radiant ones, how could the tenderness that soaked our skin have come to this». (92)

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28. BIRKELAND, Janis: Op. cit., p. 18.

29. For a discussion of the different forms of ecofeminism, see BRAIDOTTI, Rosi, Ewa Charkiewicz, Sabine Häusler and Saskia Wieringa: *Women, the Environment and Sustainable Development: Towards a Theoretical Synthesis*, London, Zed Books/In straw, 1994, pp. 161-168. In the specific context of Canadian women's writing, Marlatt's text contributes to the «geofeminist» project of rewriting both Canadian and Western narrative traditions through a self-conscious process of feminization of the land (see VERHOEVEN, W. M.: «West of 'Woman,' Or, Where No man Has Gone Before: Geofeminism in Aritha Van Herk» in Herb Wyile, Christian Riegel, Karen Overbye and Don Perkins (eds.): *A Sense of Place: Re-Evaluating Regionalism in Canadian and American Writing*, Edmonton, The U. of Alberta P., 1997, pp. 61-80; also DARIAS-BEAUTELL, Eva: *Graphies and Grafts: (Con)Texts and (Inter)Texts in the Fictions of Four Canadian Women Writers*, Bruselas, Peter Lang, 2001). Such a process –carried out by means of a refiguring of the land back in the maternal terms, where it becomes both a symbolic and a literal mother– owes much to the Native Canadian traditional views of nature and has clear political and social implications, for it puts forward «the understanding that place is actually our mother, place is what nourishes us, that without this sense of place we're dead,» says Marlatt in that context; «and, of course, the whole capitalist culture, the global culture, that we're experiencing now works to erase that recognition» («History and Place: An Interview with Daphne Marlatt», By Sue Kossew, *Canadian Literature*, 178 (2003), p. 53). Further connections could be pursued in the bioregionalist movements of the West Coast (see PLANT, Judith: «Searching for Common Ground: Ecofeminism and Bioregionalism», in Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein (eds.): *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, San Francisco, Sierra Club, 1990, pp. 155-164).

Against the background of unbearable desolation represented by the cormorant's hopeless struggle for life, the image of the quiet lake under the moonlight on the island provides some kind of release from the profound sense of distress. Against the ongoing rhetorics of invasion in the TV news, the narrator's approach to the land around her is one of harmony and identification. The strategy is again two-fold. In the first place, the sharp contrast between the two scenes enhances the power of the ongoing critique against war. At the same time, the implicit equation between the dying bird's and the narrator's suffering gives a personal imprint to the reality of war, humanizing it, bringing it closer, and making it, therefore, more unacceptable. Pacifist, feminist and ecological arguments are effectively combined in the striking juxtaposition of images. Significantly, in an earlier scene that takes place at the ferry terminal, Suzanne, unable to cope with the prospect of separation from Lori, turns her thoughts to nature for comfort and release: «I think of the mandrake and the tiny shriek it is supposed to give when it is pulled» (19). The soothing effects of the natural environment are reinforced by other scenes which suggest the possibility of a symbiotic rapport between nature and the female subject/body: there is, for instance, the eloquent image of the sea embracing the reefs and receding again, an «amorous intent»: «To live here,» Suzanne says, «is to be invaded by such rhythms. Not invaded perhaps, but seduced, pore by pore» (86). Marlatt herself supports that interpretation when she declares:

«I think we don't look enough at our relationship, the relationship between our bodies and everything that surrounds it. The air we take in, the very water we drink, the food we eat: all this becomes part of our own bodies, so even though we tend to think of ourselves as these isolated, self-contained creatures, we aren't. We are much more permeable than we think. I focus on the women-to-woman relationship in *Taken* in the context of woman-to-island relationship; in the woman-to-sensual environment that's almost as important a relationship for Suzanne as the relationship with Lori»<sup>30</sup>.

As I have been arguing so far, *Taken's* attempt at recovering and empowering an erased female experience runs parallel to the recuperation of the connection between the female (m)other and the earth (m)other, reappropriating the metaphorical association between maternalism and ecology, and advancing, in so doing, an ecofeminist ethics based on alterity and reciprocity. The novel's favourite images, for instance, those related to water, could be analysed in that ecofeminist context. So pervasive are those images in the text that Beverley Curran, using one of Marlatt's own images, qualifies it as «aquatic»: «And everywhere is the sound of water: rain dripping from the cedar boughs, torrential tropical storms; splashing pools; waves and waterfalls, the running

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30. CURRAN, Beverley and Mitoko Hirabayashi: «Conversations with Readers: An Interview with Daphne Marlatt», *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 24.1 (1999), p. 121.

tap; dew, mist, wet skin»<sup>31</sup>. Still, water images are not simply exotic, poetic or decorative, but often structure both syntax and plot and have thus multiple textual functions. They trace symbolic lines of identification between the female body and the earth, but they are also endowed with specific connotations of resistance. To begin with, they act as fluid link between the reader and the text, between language and the body:

«The reader and writer find themselves in a fluid narrative in the drifting space and time and half-light of Marlatt's latest novel. In *Taken*, as in much of Marlatt's writing, one genre interrupts another, the lesbian body swimming with the words of memory and mother against the current, but with the drift that moves language in new directions, and, thus, lives to change. Strands of gender and genre, of the real and the imagined, break and attach, tangling stories and lives with past and place»<sup>32</sup>.

These images manage, in other words, to be aesthetically pleasurable and politically effective at the same time. On the one hand, the constant allusions to moisture and wetness draw implicit and explicit connections with the maternal, with the mother's womb, and this, in turn, with the lesbian body, the foetal posture the lovers take in bed, their bodies burrowed into each other, reminiscent of the immense comfort of life before birth –an issue to which I will return. On the other, in its suggested fluidity and constant movement, water imagery in the Canadian narrative undermines the immobility of the female characters in the Asian narrative, caught, *taken*, by the various designs of history and war. And so is the sound of a pouring rain, water dripping, and of incessant splashing, meaningfully countering the dried Iraqi desert where bombs are constantly falling in the Operation Desert Storm: «A wet morning here and the war there in the late afternoon of the desert—they coexist» (37)<sup>33</sup>.

We have already seen how the violence produced by the discourse (and the reality) of war appears constantly suspended or questioned by a paralleled discourse centered on intimacy, on sexuality and on the female body. *Taken* not only breaks syntax and abandons grammatical conventions. The vocabulary of war is also intrinsically connected to the symbolic, to the Law of the Father,

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31. CURRAN, Beverley: «Swimming with the Words: Narrative Drift in Daphne Marlatt's *Taken*», *Canadian Literature*, 159 (1998), p. 56.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Obviously, the exploitation of water images with their suggested notion of fluidity can hardly be taken as a specifically feminist strategy. A regionalist reading of Marlatt's work would identify, for instance, the strong presence of rain images in the literature of the West Coast (RICOU, Laurie: *The Arbutus/Madrone Files: Reading the Pacific Northwest*, Edmonton (Alberta), NeWest, 2002, pp. 59-63; also WYLIE, Herb, Christian Riegel, Karen Overbye and Don Perkins: «Regionalism Revisited» in *A Sense of Place: Re-Evaluating Regionalism in Canadian and American Writing*, Edmonton, The U. of Alberta P., 1997, pp. ix-xiv). A postmodernist one would, instead, see, in the 'fluidity' suggested by water imagery, a fitting metaphor for the instability of contemporary modes of thoughts (BAUMAN, Zygmunt: *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity, 2000). Yet I am arguing that Marlatt's text can indeed be analysed in the context of a specifically feminist tradition (see also NEW, W. H: *Land Sliding: Imagining Space, Presence, and Power in Canadian Writing*, Toronto, U. of Toronto P., 1997, p. 168).

against which the reader is offered the language of the body, «listening for another kind of story, a story of listening way back in the body» (25). And it is precisely in the breaking of the binary oppositions between the mind/language and the body/land that the interest of the novel's proposal lies. In this sense, its recuperation of the maternal and of its connection to nature touches again upon the debate between constructionist and essentialist approaches to the female subject, confronting the well-known dangers for the materiality of feminist inscriptions to «collapse into the atextuality of that for which a representational vocabulary is lacking»<sup>34</sup>. *Taken* suggests a possible way out of that impasse by adopting a double perspective: on the one hand, the longing for a pre-symbolic stage as well as the overriding association between the female body and nature, the cyclical and organic definition of the (female) self, unmistakably connect the subject to a maternal space, theoretically outside the symbolic order, «an untheorisable space always threatening to turn into engulfment»<sup>35</sup>. On the other, the text makes it clear that there is no way out of the symbolic, and the attempted recuperation of the semiotic dimension of subjectivity can only be attained through the breaking of the opposition between both fields of experience. Significantly, when Suzanne wakes up in the early morning sensing a pre-symbolic connection to the maternal, she feels the urgent need to get up and write it down, aware that language, paradoxically, is the only possibility of expressing the wordless experience:

«Mother and child. That nameless interbeing we began with. Anxiety pushes me out of bed in the dark, to write her, reach her, bring her bodily out of nothing, which is not nothing because she is there, leaning against me on the other side of a thin membrane that separates, so thin we communicate, but not in words. I reach toward her with these half-truths, half-light fading into ordinary time and space». (21)

This dilemma is constantly and self-consciously addressed in Suzanne's very narration, invariably structured as a tension between the linguistic and the non-linguistic, the symbolic and the semiotic, the text's driving towards the natural, the physical, and the corporeal never renouncing the production of meaning:

«Do words keep us branching here rather than there where the dreams are? Wordless in another landscape, other bodies' lives, bodies that skim the air above foreign gardens, bodies that swim under water, breathing there. And i come surfacing into my own, with only the faintest memory, intact in my skin, these words that want to register being here. As if now, in the long moment before dawn, i sense what is not to be». (21)

The very thematization of the conflict, then, seems to undermine, or, at least, balance, the essentialist drive, strong in the text, towards the semiotic and the pre- or non-linguistic. The text *becomes* the language of the body; it *is* the body speaking. «My body is words,» writes Madeleine Gagnon in a

34. HIGONNET, Margaret: Op. cit., p. 13.

35. FROSH, Stephen: Op. cit., p. 300.

similar context<sup>36</sup>. We are offered an alternative form of textuality which is not necessarily against symbolic language or the configuration of narrative plot (an impossible project), but in which neither the symbolic nor the plot is the exclusive repository of meaning. As Judith Butler has argued, the subversion of naturalized approaches to gender cannot take place «through strategies that figure an utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place»<sup>37</sup>. The possibility of criticizing and dismantling the system is, in other words, contained within.

From that viewpoint, Marlatt's contribution to a larger feminist project that locates representational power in the (language of the) female subject/body seems unquestionable. As Eugenia Sojka argues, in her analysis of Betsy Warland's texts: «The very fact of foregrounding the female body as a centre of identity, a body which encompasses a mind, is a strategic form of resistance to a culture privileging rationality and spirit»<sup>38</sup>. In Marlatt's text, resistance is clearly marked female. And that option firmly places the novel within the «writing-in-the feminine» project in Canada, a kind of writing that draws on the spatiality of language to construct «a feminist gaze toward the symbolic»<sup>39</sup>, and often combines formal innovations with a political and social analysis of gender relations:

«Writings in the feminine use theory in their practices of a specific, self-conscious poetics that often draws attention to its own ways of viewing and reviewing the world. They seek to mesh, with their theoretical contemplations, the practices of poetry and fiction, the creation of images and metaphors. More generally, no literary text can be immune to its intersections with the discourses surrounding it (politics, philosophy, aesthetics). And it is the self-consciousness of this intersection that characterizes these texts, as well as their feminist orientation, their examination of the materiality of language, and their awareness of what has shaped and been shaped by language»<sup>40</sup>.

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36. GAGNON, Madeleine: «My Body in Writing», in Angela Miles and Geraldine Finn (eds.): *Feminism in Canada: From Pressure to Politics*, Montréal, Black Rose, 1982, p. 273.

37. BUTLER, Judith: *Gender Trouble*, London, Routledge, 1990, p. 34.

38. SOJKA, Eugenia: «Language and Subjectivity in the Postmodern Texts of Anglo-Canadian and Anglo-Québécois Writers», *Canadian Review of Contemporary Literature* (September, 1994), p. 359.

39. KNUTSON, Susan: *Narrative in the Feminine: Daphne Marlatt and Nicole Brossard*, Waterloo (On.), Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2000, p. 197.

40. CARRIÈRE, Marie: Op. cit., pp. 29-30. «Writing in the feminine/écriture au féminin» is a Québec-Canadian feminist literary project began in the early eighties by critics and writers such as Nicole Brossard or Louky Bersianik in Québec and Daphne Marlatt, Erin Mouré or Lola Lemire Tostevin in English Canada. The term, that has been used since that date in several Canadian Women's Conferences and critical collections, was originally meant as a material, ethical alternative to the notion of a «feminine writing,» problematic in its very definition because of its essentialist drive. In this type of writing, the political crusade for equality is inseparable from the exploration of the linguistic, social and theoretical edges of sexual difference. Drawing on the deconstructive positions articulated by the French feminists Luce Irigaray and Hélène

*Taken* both stresses the physical texture of language and textualizes, at the same time, the female body and the purely physical, locating alternative, non-symbolic forms of communication in the world of nature and lesbian sexuality, which appear, as we have seen, intimately connected: «I think of your sapsuckers mining for nectar in the woody skin of trees, your delight in them, and i envy beings without words» (35). And «[i]t is this non-thinking,» argues Curran paraphrasing the above quotation,

«the envy of beings without words, that lets a narrative drift to find itself, not in the story line, or the rigid constraints of a particular genre, but in a flow of words which lets the body go, a narrative that is feeling its way through what is not known: the aquatic narrative dives and surfaces, replaying the past, surprised by the new in what has been before, letting the ear hear what the eye cannot see, and changing the rhythm of writing into a process at least as sensual as it is cerebral»<sup>41</sup>.

The novel manages, in this way, to reconnect the female body to the mother/land without falling into the trap of viewing that move as the possibility of a «return» to a semiotic limbo. At times, its proposal looks close to Michelle Cliff's image of the garden as «a new terrain, a new location, in feminist poetics. Not a room of one's own, not a fully public or collective self, not a domestic realm—it is a space in the imagination which allows for the inside, the outside, and the liminal elements inbetween»<sup>42</sup>. Marlatt's text seems indeed in consonance with that feminist poetics, specially in its proposed liminality, in its definition of a garden as an in-between landscape of harmony, no longer a room but open space, in its revision and rearticulation of previous feminist models for creativity. Yet I would argue that the creative force of the metaphorical garden does not succeed in undercutting the destructive force of the parallel masculinist discourse. Towards the end of the novel, Suzanne compares her love story with the act of gardening, in which her planting the tiny lettuce seeds becomes an intimate form of love, a gift of life. But that very delicate gesture, juxtaposed in the sentence to death, suffering and destruction in the Gulf, does not seem powerful enough to resist, suppress or suspend

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Cixous, writings in the feminine produce a kind of text that blend poetry, prose and theory, and whose self-conscious focus on the female generic is not necessarily linked to identity, biology or content.

41. CURRAN, Beverly: Op. cit., p. 65.

42. KAPLAN, Caren: «Deterritorizations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse», *Cultural Critique*, 6 (Spring 1987), p. 197. This idea of the garden seems to have provided a rich trope for women to express their relation to the land throughout colonial histories. As A. Kolodny (*The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*, Chapel Hill (NC), U. of North Carolina P, 1984) has stated, white middle-class North American frontier women's desire to transform the wilderness around them was different from their men's desire to control or dominate it. Rather they saw the wilderness as the perfect space for gardens, «a place where a landscape of harmony between soil and weather and plants and people was possible, a place in which relations among people would reflect the tenderness of caring for the land» (ROSE, Gillian: *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*, Minneapolis, U. of Minnesota P, 1993, p. 111).



the poisonous reality of war, the planting spaces and the promise of new life turned, by the twist of the sentence, into deadly trenches:

«Perhaps i haven't given you enough space, i think, my hands in the earth sprinkling tiny lettuce seeds that, once covered, will begin to sprout in the damp weather. I try to separate the tiny flecks of dormant energy, ranking them with my finger to give each one enough growing room. Already i can imagine green rosettes appearing, the struggle with slugs, and then, if we're lucky, the pleasure of pulling leaves unfurled and crisp for the salads you love.

[...] I push the wet soil into the shallow trench thinking of death again, of burned bodies in the desert sand». (109)

In one sense, it is true that despite the disturbing effect of the war vocabulary, the reader is offered some kind of repose in the depiction of that garden. Yet the text's proposal goes further than that, suggesting the need for a complete fusion of the female body as/in space, the space of the island, the earth, the maternal space. The novel has explored different approaches to the spatial dimension of subjectivity, trying to articulate what the narrator calls «the inner geography of home» (98), in the territorial terms of the Asian narrative and in the emotional terms of the Canadian one. Neither of these, however, gives the narrator a sense of continuity, of belonging. Instead, it is her connection to the land that provides the only sense of grounding, and this argument becomes stronger as the novel reaches its end, and by means of the intersection of the two narrative frameworks; that is, by means of the articulation of the maternal space. Home is nowhere but in (mother) nature: «I find no words for this threshold, though the sense of being suspended here is exquisite. Present in your absence, my love, loves echoing. It's still dark, the gulls are crying. Against the greying bowl of sky i can see their shapes swerve out over the lake and it gives me a sense of relief, of space» (115-116).

The novel's articulation of this sense of grounding becomes an ethical choice inasmuch as it runs counter to an analysis of the territorial rhetoric of war and to an unambiguous rejection of violence and the abuse of power across space and time. Its exploration of an alternative form of belonging based on the fusion with the land and on a recuperation of the maternal becomes an ecofeminist ethical proposal, for it not only suggests a possible model for social relations (between women and between women and men), but also advances the need to reconsider our own relation to the land we inhabit. The project is obviously an ambitious one, and the broken sentences may be read in that sense as «the marks of an unfinished project, of deeply entrenched problems, and what are still today unresolved questions»<sup>43</sup>. The validity of this utopian proposal, however, should not be discarded, specially now, after we have lived the shame and the obscenity of a second Gulf War, the possibility of yet more brutality uncannily, and unknowingly, foreshadowed by *Taken's*

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43. CARRIÈRE, Marie: Op. cit., p. 6.

very last words: «The stories we invent and refuse to invent ourselves by, all unfinished...»(130).

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